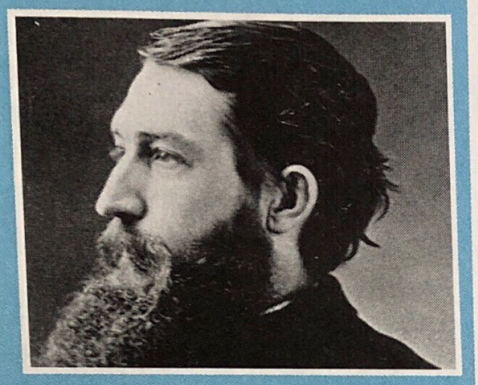
THEME:
OUR LIVING EARTH

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

Song of the Chattahoochee



Writers' Techniques

Sidney Lanier (1842–1881) was a talented musician as well as a gifted poet. He had a strong interest in the relationship between music and poetry. As a result, he abandoned conventional poetic structures and sought to create a musical rhythm in his poetry. Born in Macon, Georgia, Lanier entered Oglethorpe University, where he studied poetry and music. In 1880 he published *The Science of English Verse.* In his book Lanier stated his belief that poetry should have the natural rhythm and fluidity of music and that the sound of a poem should reinforce its meaning.

Sound Devices. Poets use a variety of sound devices to give their writing a musical quality. Four of the most frequently used sound devices are alliteration, consonance, assonance, and internal rhyme.

Alliteration is the repetition of similar sounds, usually consonants, at the beginnings of words or accented syllables. Notice the repetition of the *l* and *t* sounds in the following line from "Song of the Chattahoochee": "The *l*aving *l*aurel *t*urned my *t*ide."

Consonance is the repetition of consonant sounds at the ends of words or accented syllables. For example, the *l* sound is repeated in the following line from "Song of the Chattahoochee": "Vei*l*ing the va*ll*eys of Ha*ll*."

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds. For example, the long *a* sound is repeated in the following line: "Ava*i*l: I am f*a*in for to water the pl*a*in."

Rhyme refers to the repetition of similar or identical sounds in the accented syllables of two or more words appearing close to each other in a poem. Internal rhyme is rhyme that occurs within a line. An example of internal rhyme appears in the following line from "Song of the Chattahoochee": "With a lover's *pain* to at*tain* the *plain.*"

Focus

In "Song of the Chattahoochee" Lanier personifies, or attributes human characteristics to, a river. Think of another element of nature that a writer might personify. Then prepare a list of human qualities that could be attributed to this element.

Primary Source

Sidney Lanier's ideas about poetry influenced many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers. Among them was American poet and author Hamlin Garland, who wrote, "That he was an immense force in my life . . . I gladly bear witness. He taught me freedom within law. His lines flowed down the printed page like rills of water rippling into whorls of rhyme, pleasantly, unexpectedly, and so easily as to be hardly more confining than prose."

Song of the Chattahoochee[1]

Sidney Lanier

Out of the hills of Habersham,
Down the valleys of Hall,[2]
I hurry amain to reach the plain,
Run the rapid and leap the fall,
Split at the rock and together again,
Accept my bed, or narrow or wide,
And flee from folly on every side
With a lover's pain to attain the plain
Far from the hills of Habersham,
Far from the valleys of Hall.

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1. Chattahoochee (ch*h*at′ ə h$\overline{\text{oo}}$′ ch*h*ē): A river in western Georgia.
2. Habersham . . . Hall: Two counties through which the Chattahoochee flows.

HARPERS FERRY FROM JEFFERSON ROCK, 1857
Edward Beyer
Virginia State Library

All down the hills of Habersham,
All through the valleys of Hall,
The rushes cried *Abide, Abide,*
The willful waterweeds held me thrall,
The laving laurel turned my tide,
The ferns and the fondling grass said *Stay,*
The dewberry dipped for to work delay,
And the little reeds sighed *Abide, abide,*
Here in the hills of Habersham,
Here in the valleys of Hall.

High o'er the hills of Habersham,
Veiling the valleys of Hall,
The hickory told me manifold
Fair tales of shade, the poplar tall
Wrought me her shadowy self to hold,
The chestnut, the oak, the walnut, the pine,
Overleaning, with flickering meaning and sign,
Said, *Pass not, so cold, these manifold*
Deep shades of the hills of Habersham,
These glades in the valleys of Hall.

And oft in the hills of Habersham,
And oft in the valleys of Hall,
The white quartz shone, and the smooth brook-stone
Did bar me of passage with friendly brawl,
And many a luminous jewel lone
—Crystals clear or a-cloud with mist,
Ruby, garnet and amethyst—
Made lures with the lights of streaming stone
In the clefts of the hills of Habersham,
In the beds of the valleys of Hall.

But oh, not the hills of Habersham,
And oh, not the valleys of Hall
Avail: I am fain for to water the plain.
Downward the voices of Duty call—
Downward, to toil and be mixed with the main,
The dry fields burn, and the mills are to turn,
And a myriad flowers mortally yearn,
And the lordly main from beyond the plain
Calls o'er the hills of Habersham,
Calls through the valleys of Hall.

Responding to the Selection

Your Response

1. What did you hear as you read this poem? What did you see?
2. What are the "voices of Duty" in your life? How does your response to their call compare with the river's?

Recalling

3. (a) Toward what is the river racing? (b) What is attempting to delay the river in its course? (c) What calls the water forward?

Interpreting

4. Who is the speaker in this poem?
5. In this poem Lanier presents an extended personification of the Chattahoochee River. Name three other elements of nature that Lanier personifies in the poem.
6. Consider Lanier's use of personification in describing the river's flow. (a) What do you think the course of the river symbolizes? (b) What do the forces that try to delay the river represent? (c) What are "the voices of Duty"?

Applying

7. Do you think this poem is as effective today as it was when it was written? Why?

Analyzing Literature

Recognizing Sound Devices

Alliteration, consonance, assonance, and internal rhyme are four sound devices used in poetry. **Alliteration** is the repetition of similar sounds, usually consonants, at the beginnings of words or accented syllables (for example, "*R*un the *r*apid," line 4). **Consonance** is the repetition of consonant sounds at the ends of words or accented syllables (for example, "va*ll*eys of Ha*ll*"). **Assonance** is the repetition of vowel sounds (for example, "w*i*th fl*i*ckering," line 27). **Internal rhyme** is rhyme that occurs within a line (for example, "I hurry a*main* to reach the *plain,*" line 3).

1. Find two more examples of each of these techniques in "Song of the Chattahoochee."
2. How do these examples convey the natural movement of the river?

Critical Thinking and Reading

Analyzing the Effect of Sound Devices

Sidney Lanier believed that the sound of a poem should help to reinforce its meaning. In "Song of the Chattahoochee" he used sound devices to imitate the natural flowing of a river. For example, his use of alliteration in the line "And *f*lee *f*rom *f*olly on every side" captures the river's dancing, winding movement.

Do you agree with Lanier's contention? Support your answer.

Thinking and Writing

Writing an Extended Personification

What would a mountain say if it could speak? What message would the ocean give to humankind? What would a tornado say as it left behind a trail of destruction?

Write a poem or a short narrative essay in which you present an extended personification of an element of nature. Start by reviewing the list of human qualities you have already prepared. Add any other qualities you think of. Then write your personification using the element you are personifying as your speaker or narrator.

Learning Options

1. **Cross-curricular Connection.** Investigate the relationship between music and nature. Locate a recording of a musical composition that brings to life some force of nature, such as a river or a storm. Give the piece a new title, for example, "The Mississippi Mambo," and play the recording for classmates.
2. **Speaking and Listening.** Do you think Lanier's poem gives voice to the Chattahoochee River? To hear the sound of the water as it swirls downstream to the ocean, read the poem aloud to yourself. Listen to how the alliteration in the first stanza speeds your reading, while the alliteration in succeeding stanzas slows you down. How successful was Lanier in imitating the river's sound?